

AN AGENDA FOR LANGUAGES

COMMUNICATION IS THE KEY

Our world is a world of messages - direct and obscure, subtle and abrasive, ephemeral and profound. Interpreting these messages - being a successful communicator - is a vital, but often underestimated prerequisite if we are to participate fully in that world .

Without successful communication individuals can have no sense of their identity or understanding of their relations with others. In the 21st century those identities are ever more complex and the relationships between local, national and global allegiances ever more crucial. Failure to understand such complexities limits individuals' life chances and contributes to social exclusion.

Without successful communication, communities cannot develop a sense of their past or have confidence in their future. They will find it difficult to interrelate with other communities. Such failure to communicate is a major source of isolation, xenophobia and racism.

Without successful communication economies can not properly function. In the Knowledge Society of the 21st century, where a premium is placed on communicative ability, countries, companies and individuals must communicate successfully in order to prosper and survive.

Without successful communication societies can not work together. Political progress, peace and prosperity depend on communication, and political developments are increasingly and inexorably global . The countries of the United Kingdom must work together within a multinational Europe in a world where isolation is not an option.

Communication does not guarantee peace or prosperity. But without it neither is possible.

LANGUAGES ARE A PRECIOUS RESOURCE

At the heart of communication is language. The complexity of modern society creates complex language needs - access to a single language is not enough and languages are more than a useful skill or a subject in school. Competence in language and in languages has become a core and defining characteristic of a citizen. The languages deficit in the UK has become an urgent economic, social and political question.

Although steps are being taken to address short and mid term needs, policy has to be based on a long term vision - an "agenda for languages". Starting from a conviction that languages are primarily a resource to be valued, we note that the United Kingdom is rich in languages but that the majority of its people are linguistically impoverished. We therefore aspire to achieve a situation where

- communities and individuals are secure and confident in their use of language to express their cultures, their individuality and their aspirations; ·

- individuals can move across different countries, communities and groups, communicating successfully and confidently in the pursuit of their social and economic goals:
- learners have readily available opportunities throughout life to develop further languages and further language skills
- our education systems impart a universal understanding of the diversity and richness of language available, both in the UK and the world, and of the ways in which language is used by individuals and society ·
- our people have a view of citizenship which extends beyond the immediate boundaries of the nation and the state and who use language learning and communication in support of this
- our national, regional and local agencies of government provide the resources to enable this to happen.

MULTILINGUALISM is BETTER

There is a deeply rooted assumption in the United Kingdom that English monolingualism is enough, to meet the communicative aspirations of modern society.

We contest this limiting and ultimately defeatist belief. In the world as a whole including significant parts of the United Kingdom Multilingualism is the norm. In the knowledge society of the 21st Century Multilingualism is better.

It is better for countries and states whose shared ambitions are for peace growth and prosperity.

It is better for business whose purpose is increased trade, greater competitiveness and greater employability

It is better for communities which seek social inclusion, mutual tolerance and an appreciation of their past and present heritages.

It is better for individuals - for their sense of self, their openness to the world, their opportunities for economic and personal growth

At this time of great fear and dangers in the world, it is better for humanity in its vital quest for peace and stability and enrichment. Only through Multilingualism can we really understand and appreciate the stranger.

A LANGUAGE POLICY IS NOT A LUXURY.

If Multilingualism is better, it follows that we need language policies, not as a luxury, but as an essential feature of civilised society.

In particular we believe that Languages and language capability are basic life skills to which all citizens should have entitlement.

Such entitlement, converted into concrete policies at all phases of education, training and social life would help to turn our vision into reality. It would ensure that all people had access to literacy and to the opportunity to understand the power of language, that they were helped to value linguistic and thus cultural diversity, that they had opportunities to learn and use a range of languages.

Such an entitlement would have major implications for Educational and Training policy, for the whole of Civil Society and for the workings of Commerce and Industry

ISSUES AND ACTORS

The situation in the UK is complex and diverse. The constituent nations will develop specific policies in response to national, regional and institutional needs. Such policies will be informed by the global context, and in particular by the UK's position within a multinational, multilingual Europe.

Within this complexity and diversity there are also common features which are likely to determine the policy agenda. We note in particular two related paradoxes -

The UK is rich in languages. More languages are spoken than in most if not all developed countries. Yet the majority of its people are monolingual. Only 33% claim any competence in a language other than English

English is effectively a world language for international communication in trade, politics and science. Yet only 31% of Europeans claim to be able to communicate in English.

These paradoxes may have limited our past understanding, but they also provide opportunities for the future. They point us to a policy agenda which is a broad and challenging one as we seek to link these different strands.

For Education the challenge will be fundamental. How will we provide an understanding of how language and languages work? How will we impart a love of and respect for cultures? How will we equip all learners with the ability to learn and achieve competence in languages? . How will we provide resources for language education from the Early Years to the Third Age

For civil society the challenge is a different but related one. It is one of ensuring mutual recognition and respect for all language groups, of enabling communities to flourish and work together, of ensuring social inclusion through access to language and cultural support, and of recognising our responsibility to participate in Europe and the wider world

For commerce and industry the first challenge is to ensure that those engaged in wealth creation see communication as their business. We must find ways to ensure that languages and communication are part of the skills agenda, a central part of the basic economic strategy and aspiration both to upskill the workforce and to increase trade and national prosperity.

A NATIONAL AGENDA

The European Year of Languages followed the Nuffield Inquiry's major report on language capability and the report of the Ministerial Action Group in Scotland. The Governments of the UK are now giving attention to language issues, perhaps more comprehensively than at any time since the First World War.

These events provide us with an opportunity as well as a risk. The risk is that we will not go far enough - that the moment may be lost and we may fall further behind in terms of our linguistic deficit.

The opportunity is to make a significant breakthrough on this issue which is crucial to our national prosperity, our well being and our place in the world. It is in this respect a truly NATIONAL agenda. Not everything can happen at once - the Nuffield Inquiry spoke of a 20 Year Agenda - but the movement must be made towards greater coherence and commitment. And to do this we must work together to translate our shared vision into action.

This will require the participation of many agencies - National Governments, Local Authorities, National Agencies, Teachers, Schools, Universities, Employers and Employer Bodies, The Press and media, Parents and Learners.

All have a role to play in taking forward a national agenda which concerns all our futures.